



The SAGE Encyclopedia of Trans Studies

Women's Colleges

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The subject of trans students' inclusion at women's colleges is one that has animated vigorous internal and public debates, protests, and policy changes since at least the early 2000s. The issue began to gain prominence as an increasing number of students came out as trans men while attending women's colleges. The conversation then grew to include trans female and nonbinary students. As understandings of gender have broadened and deepened beyond the rigid binary in North America in the early 21st century, women's college students, alumnae/i, faculty and staff, administrators, and trustees have had to reevaluate their frameworks for thinking about gender. In so doing, they have had to determine what the implications are for colleges dedicated to the education of women.

Trans students, alongside their queer and feminist cis student allies, have lobbied and protested against trans exclusionary admissions policies at many women's colleges. These actions have often resulted in these policies being changed to allow for a greater inclusion of trans students. Going forward, women's colleges will need to grapple not only with which populations marginalized by gender should be allowed to apply to a women's college (i.e., whether to admit just trans women, trans women and nonbinary individuals assigned female at birth, or all trans people) but also how trans students are treated in every aspect of campus life.

Women's Colleges and Trans Inclusion: Historical Background

Women's colleges began in the United States in 1837 with the opening of Mount Holyoke Female Seminary in Massachusetts, now known as Mount Holyoke College. These schools were designed as institutions where (mostly white) women could receive an education at a time when higher education was a pathway open only to white men. Not to be confused with finishing schools or "charm schools," which focused on social etiquette and attracting husbands for wealthy white women, women's colleges have historically emphasized a rigorous academic curriculum. The Seven Sisters schools of the Northeast—originally comprising Barnard, Bryn Mawr, Mount Holyoke, Radcliffe, Smith, Vassar, and Wellesley—were established as the female equivalent of the then all-male Ivy League.

As previously male-only colleges and universities increasingly began to admit women during the 20th century, and as women made key legal gains (e.g., Title IX in 1972, formal workplace harassment protections under Title VII in 1980), enrollment at women's colleges dropped. Many of the schools were forced to close their doors or begin admitting men to maintain financial solvency. This trend continues today, evidenced by Pine Manor College in Massachusetts becoming coeducational in 2014 and Sweet Briar College in Virginia almost closing in 2015. Sweet Briar has remained open, after a backlash from students, alumnae/i, and faculty led to a major fundraising push and lawsuits against the college's closing. Many current students and graduates of women's colleges, who have experienced their colleges as crucial for centering and building female empowerment, leadership, and academic excellence, are strongly opposed to their alma maters admitting male students. Because of this history, the issue of trans students at women's colleges has been especially fraught.

Arguments for and against admitting trans students to women's colleges often involve discussions of privilege and oppression related to gender and race. For example, some women's college community members have questioned why anyone male identified would want to attend a college established for women. According to these critics, any slot taken by a male student would be one less available to a woman who would benefit from the colleges' focus on female leadership. Allegations of white male privilege have often surfaced when discussing the presence of trans men at the mostly white-dominated campuses. Some women's college administrators have also voiced concerns that admitting students other than cis women would jeopardize their institution's unique protections under Title IX, even though the colleges that have enrolled trans students have not had their funding challenged.

Arguments against trans women's place on women's college campuses have tended toward questioning their status as female. Those opposed to trans women's inclusion have often contended that the applicants should be required to have already undergone gender-affirming bottom surgery. Trans advocates have countered that this focus on genitals unfairly implies that trans women pose a similar potential threat to cis women as do cis, heterosexual men under rape culture. Trans women and their allies argue that trans women deserve to

have their safety considered as well, especially given the high rates of violence, particularly sexual violence, inflicted on trans women. Advocates for trans women also point to the considerable financial and health system barriers that limit the access of trans female teens to gender-affirming surgery, especially if they do not have familial support. On a more basic level, proponents of admitting trans women have asserted that any college designated “for women” must embrace all women. Those who seek to include trans women at women’s colleges reject what they consider the trans exclusionary radical feminist (TERF) rhetoric driving many of the arguments against trans women’s inclusion.

Activism for Trans Inclusion

At Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts, the growing visibility of trans men on campus in the early to mid-2000s—including the participation of one student in the 2005 Sundance Channel documentary *TransGeneration*—accelerated debates about trans students at women’s colleges, albeit with a focus on the experiences of trans men. Other women’s colleges also began having similar discussions at this time. As more and more trans men started publicly coming out, often with the support of the LBQ student communities at their women’s colleges, they found that campus administrators seemed reluctant to fully embrace them as members of the college. They also faced hostility, microaggressions, and overt discrimination from other students, faculty, and staff, such as students glaring at them in residence halls, professors refusing to use the right pronouns in classes, and being deadnamed at graduation. To combat these forms of discrimination, trans students and allies formed groups to support each other and to push for change.

Trans women were not as prominent in the debates about who “counted” as being able to attend a women’s college until the fall of 2012, when a young trans woman named Rose Wong applied to Smith College. Her application garnered national media attention after Smith rejected her application, telling her she could not be considered for admission because her father had marked “male” on her federal financial aid form. Those coming to Wong’s defense were incensed by the Smith administration’s “case-by-case” approach to trans female applicants, arguing that there should be a uniform policy allowing trans women to apply. Wong’s allies also pointed out the classed dimension of her being rejected based on a financial aid form, wondering whether she would have been considered had her family not needed to apply for financial aid.

After the Wong debacle, Smith students formed the group Q&A (said to stand for Queers & Allies) to advocate for an across-the-board policy for trans women’s admission. Q&A delivered a 4,000-signature petition in support of trans women to the Smith admissions office in May 2013 and continued protesting through the next school year. In a large-scale display of solidarity in April 2014, about 200 students signed up for shifts to take turns participating in an all-day rally on behalf of trans women outside the Smith admissions office. In May 2015, the Smith Board of Trustees—facing yet another protest—finally voted to admit trans women.

Meanwhile, other women’s colleges were beginning to change their admissions policies in favor of admitting trans women. In the late summer of 2014, Mills College in Oakland, California, became the first to categorically include trans women in its admissions policies. Mount Holyoke followed closely behind that September. As more and more prominent women’s colleges changed their policies, this put more pressure on those that had not, and student activists were emboldened to press their case even harder. As of 2020, 21 U.S. women’s colleges will admit trans women based solely on those women’s self-identification, and trans men are eligible to apply to six of the schools without restriction. Five campuses allow nonbinary applicants to apply, although two of those five specify that the nonbinary applicant must be assigned female at birth.

Who Is Included?

U.S. women’s colleges vary in how they conceptualize and implement their missions in today’s multigendered world. Some colleges, like Hollins University in Virginia and Smith College, accept trans women but not trans men or nonbinary students, in accordance with their identities as women’s colleges. In contrast, schools like Mount Holyoke and Agnes Scott College in Georgia accept applications from any prospective student who is not a cis man. From 2007 to 2019, Hollins required enrolled students who realized they were trans men to leave the college, a policy controversial among students and alumnae/i until its repeal. Bennett College, Converse College, and Stephens College still do not permit students who transition to male while on campus

to graduate from their schools. Even though these colleges essentially ban trans men from campus, they continue to have students who realize that they are trans after enrolling, thereby undermining the assumption that all students at a women's college are women.

A consensus remains elusive on whether women's colleges should admit only women—cis and trans—or whether, in line with their historical purpose of elevating those marginalized by their gender (i.e., cis women), they should extend their inclusion to everyone whose gender is minoritized. Accordingly, many current students of the historic Seven Sisters colleges now refer to the schools instead as the “Seven Siblings.” At the same time, many students, including some trans students, strongly feel that admitting people who do not identify as women to a women's college undermines the unique importance of these spaces for women. They also argue that admitting trans men and nonbinary people to a so-called women's college delegitimizes the genders of those who are truly not women.

While trans men have been at women's colleges in increasingly visible numbers since the beginning of the 21st century, attention to the needs and experiences of nonbinary and trans female students has been more recent. Women's colleges are increasingly being called on to put into practice the values indicated by their mission statements and admissions policies and address the needs of trans students for safety, dignity, respect, and the experience of being fully integrated into the campus community. These aims must also take into consideration the other identities and subject positions that trans students (and cis students) bring with them, including race, class, sexuality, religion, nationality, and disability. Trans students and their cis allies at women's colleges are urging their campus administrations to increase trans course content, hire trans faculty, bring more trans speakers to campus for talks and workshops, and develop awareness trainings for faculty, staff, and administrators on how best to support the gender diversity of their students.

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See also [Activism](#); [Campus Policies/Campus Climate](#); [College Undergraduate Students](#); [Community Building](#); [Nonbinary Genders](#); [Queer, Intersections With Trans](#); [Trans Men](#); [Trans Women](#)

Further Readings

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